**February 21, 2021 Mark 2:18-22**

***To Fast or Feast***

**Scripture:** Mark 2:18-22 NRSV

*(18)Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" (19)Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. (20)The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. (21)"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. (22)And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."*

**Notes:**

1. ***Fasting*** is intended as an act to draw believers ***closer*** to God.
   1. Fasting is not practiced at the expense of the ***feast***.
   2. Fasting is supposed to make the ***feasting*** more meaningful.
2. The Pharisees were ***adding*** to the law.
   1. Pharisees ***prided*** themselves on doing things the right way.
   2. The Pharisees began to sin when they ***commanded*** others to follow an example, the law did not ***mandate***,
3. Those fasting didn’t ***understand*** what was happening.
   1. Jesus’s was getting back to the ***heart*** of the law,
   2. The law was supposed to be about ***love*** for God and others.
   3. The Pharisees tried to ***honor*** God the best way they knew how.
   4. Their focus was no longer on love and grace but who was ***right***.
4. ***We*** are supposed to be people of ***love***, not law.
   1. ***Holiness*** is rooted in love, not in our effort.
   2. Love and holiness should and will lead us to ***action***,
   3. The ***Holy*** ***Spirit*** brings about holiness in the lives of people.
   4. God will go any ***distance*** to be in relationship with humanity.
5. Learn to ***temper*** our fasting with feasting.
   1. ***Feasting*** is just as much a part of the Lenten practice as fasting.
   2. ***Feasting*** reminds us Christ will come to restore all things.
6. We ***feast*** and***fast*** because the kingdom of God is not yet fulfilled.
   1. We fast for a world longing for the ***redemption*** of all things.
   2. We fast to ***commune*** with this God who loves us so much.
   3. We feast because of the ***hope*** of Christ’s return.
   4. We can ***celebrate*** the goodness and graciousness of God.

**Script:**

It is no secret that churches in the Holiness tradition pride themselves on their ability to sacrifice. The road to personal piety or devotion has been paved by sacrifice, giving things up like alcohol, dancing, and jewelry; even wedding bands. When the heart of those rules and policies is examined, it becomes plain that they always started out of immense love and a desire for holiness.

The restriction of dancing started out having more to do with where dancing took place rather than the actual act of dancing, for example. Holiness people weren’t supposed to frequent brothels, and because there was a high emphasis on generosity toward the poor, it wasn’t considered prudent to attend dances hosted by wealthiest members of society. These were the two main places where dancing occurred at the turn of the century, choosing not to dance by avoiding these places was a way to sacrifice something, in order that one might be made more holy

But, over time, much of the reasoning that birthed these rules has been forgotten. It has been replaced by short, quick avenues for harsh judgment, leading to legalism taking root in the hearts of many. Giving up things has often become a source of pride for us, not just in the Holiness tradition but also in broader culture, through activities like fad dieting; and the ways we celebrate those who “give up” certain things in order to maintain some sort of physical ideal. Of course, we are not talking about the simple act of changing bad habits; doing so in order to become more healthy; we are talking about when dieting and exercise are used as ways to worship the physical form.

It will come as no surprise that this has been a problem for humans for a long time. Sin has a way of twisting good things and good intent, turning them into damaging things. Our text today shows us that this was an issue for the Pharisees as well. Turn with me to Mark 2:18-22 as we share in the reading of our Gospel passage for today.

Mark 2:18-22 NRSV (18)Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" (19)Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. (20)The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. (21)"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. (22)And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

Fasting is intended to serve as a sacrificial act that would draw believers closer to God. The Pharisees viewed their ability to fast in high regard as a legalistic tool, a way to judge others and to check boxes for themselves. As Fasting had been twisted into an act that wasn’t about the grace of God; it had become a way to earn God’s favor. There are many issues with this type of legalistic approach to fasting, but one dangerous aspect of collateral damage happens when we are so focused on fasting that we lose our ability to feast.

The Pharisees had lost it, and we are in danger of losing it too if we aren’t careful. Fasting is not supposed to be practiced at the expense of the feast. Instead, it is supposed to draw us closer to the Lord during both the sacrifice and the time of praise. Fasting is supposed to make the feasting more meaningful.

**The Pharisees were adding to the law.** The Pharisees weren’t merely following a strict interpretation of the law. They were actually adding to it, making it more difficult for people to follow. The Pharisees prided themselves on doing things the right way, and they got caught up in their own interpretation of “right.” The Pharisees were doing more fasting than the law commanded, which wasn’t bad or sinful in and of itself, and may even have begun in a good place. But they began to sin when they commanded others to follow an example the law did not mandate, and then judged those who didn’t. These actions placed a great burden on themselves; not only the extra fasting but also their self-righteous judgment of others. These actions also placed unnecessary obstacles for others to participate in the worship of Yahweh.

**Those fasting were not evil. They didn’t understand what was happening in their midst.** Jesus came as a fulfillment of the law (Matthew 5:17), which means he illustrates and embodies the intent of the law. Jesus was continually under criticism throughout the book of Mark for the ways he seemingly broke the law, especially for doing things on the Sabbath— but his breaking of the Sabbath wasn’t about breaking law; it was about getting back to the heart of the law, which is about love, grace, and connecting with God in a meaningful way.

The law ultimately was supposed to be about love for God and others (Galatians 5:14): Even the Ten Commandments, when broken down and examined carefully, can be seen to focus on love for God and others. Love is supposed to be at the heart of the law, but it’s been misinterpreted and twisted into legalism, which is the only thing that remains when love is forgotten.

The Pharisees and John’s disciples were so busy trying to work out the law that they missed the presence of Yahweh incarnate (the Messiah) in their midst. Jesus told them that his disciples were not fasting because the bridegroom was with them which means it was time to celebrate and to feast. The Pharisees were still fasting because they didn’t see the reason to feast. The Pharisees were so busy looking for someone who fit their own expectations that they were missing the Messiah, waiting for a political or religious leader to come and overthrow the government. They were waiting for the Messiah to come in grandeur, but instead, he came in humility, and they missed it. They expected the coming kingdom to be brought about in ways that they desired and dictated. They thought a relationship with God came through working harder to keep the law— which is, and of itself, an impossible burden.

Many times, we villainize the Pharisees, but we must remember that they were truly trying to seek after God. And like many of us, zeal to serve the Lord leads to distortions of what is right. The Pharisees thought their legalism was indeed honoring God. Despite not understanding, they were trying to honor God the best way they knew how. Their issues weren’t with the original intent—the desire to honor God. The issue was that they lost sight of the original intent. Their focus was no longer on love and grace but on who was right. The focus became about working harder to do things that went beyond what the law explicitly stated as though holiness were a competition to be won instead of a state of relationship with God.

**We are supposed to be people of love, not law.** We often, like the Pharisees, mistakenly believe that our actions will make us holy. We try to put upon others, rules to follow in order to create a sense of holiness. This misguided behavior leads to our wrongly viewing other people as needing to be fixed rather than viewing them as the beloved creation of God, viewing them as being made in God’s image.

It also burdens others and ourselves with impossible standards. When we rely on ourselves and continually fail to live up to impossible standards, we begin to feel shame, we start to believe that we cannot have a relationship with God unless and until we are perfect. we may even go as far as to visualize and portray for others a God who acts as vindictive, punishing judge, rather than the loving parent that He is.

Holiness is rooted in love, not in our effort. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop said in her book *A Theology of Love*: “Love takes the harshness out of holiness. Love takes the incredibility out of Perfection. Love takes the antinomianism out of faith. Love takes the moralism out of obedience. Love takes the gnosticism out of cleansing. Love takes the abstraction out of truth. Love puts the personal into truth. Love puts the ethical into holiness. Love puts process into life. Love puts urgency into crisis. Love puts seriousness into sin. Love puts fellowship into perfection.”

While love and holiness should and will lead us to action, it is the type of action that is motivated by our relationship with God. It is not the type of action that we must do in order to earn something; not by shame, fear, or guilt. The primary action toward holiness is the action of God toward humanity. The Holy Spirit brings about holiness in the lives of people. Prevenient grace draws people to the heart of God. Saving grace draws people into relationship with God. Sanctifying grace transforms people into holy people who reflect God.

God drawing close to humanity through the incarnation of Jesus Christ illustrates that God will go any distance to be in relationship with humanity. The ushering in of the kingdom of God—a world in which all will be made new, will be made holy—is important. In Jesus we see that God wants to restore humanity, relationships, and all of creation. Focusing on our effort, we miss out on the reality that God is already at work in the world, often in ways we don’t expect. The kingdom of God is already here but not yet completed. Jesus initiated the new kingdom, and we bring the kingdom on earth when we act in love, when we do what is just, when we live lives of humility and grace, and when we exhibit righteousness.

**We should learn from the Pharisees and always temper our fasting with feasting.** Even in the midst of Lent—a time set aside to fast—we fast not out of a sense of guilt or legalism but out of a desire, a desire to be formed more deeply like Christ. Our fasting should not cause us shame but should cause us to reflect more deeply. Reflecting on how God loves us and on our love for God. Our fasting should also spur us to act in love toward the world around us. Our fasting should be a way that we see the kingdom of God lived out in the world around us. Every Sunday in Lent is a feasting day. Feasting is just as much a part of the Lenten practice as fasting. Feasting helps us remember that the bridegroom has come and that Christ left the Holy Spirit to be present with us. Feasting also reminds us that Christ will come again to restore all things. We are to be reminded in both the feast and the fast of a God who longs to redeem us and all things that all things are to be made holy.

Feasting is a spiritual discipline as well. We must learn to celebrate well, to receive and praise the goodness of God. Celebrate well, in spite of the darkness we may currently be experiencing. What might it look like to practice feasting, even—maybe especially—in seasons of darkness? How does practicing feasting remind us and the world of hope and love?

**We feast *and* fast because we know that the kingdom of God is not yet completely fulfilled.** Jesus’s disciples didn’t fast because Jesus was with them. Similarly, we feast because of the hope we have in the sureness that Christ has come. We feast because of the hope Christ’s resurrection brings. We feast because of the hope of Christ’s return. We fast as well—because the kingdom of God has not yet been fully realized. We fast to draw closer to Christ while we await his return. We fast in order to create space to hear God more clearly. We fast to make room for the unusual ways that God often works in the world. We fast not out of shame, guilt, or a sense of earning God’s love but out of an understanding of our need to commune with this God who loves us so much.

We fast for a world longing for the redemption of all things. Our fasts can sometimes turn into stumbling blocks for ourselves and those around us. I first remember learning about fasting when I was in college. There was a large catholic presence on campus and I had friends who would practice a fast every year. As I observed them it seemed they started a fast and they really did not have any purpose in doing so, other than it was something that they did each year. Many times, they would lose sight of the reason they started the fast and soon quit the fast. It created confusion for me for I did not understand the purpose.

Why deprive yourself of so much for something that had no purpose. I have learned a lot about fasting over the last 35 years. You may forget why you started a fast in the first place. Are you motivated by love or by shame? Are you judging those around you according to harsh standards that God has not set?

We fast for a reason and often a good one. We fast because the kingdom of God has not yet been fully realized. We fast to draw closer to Christ while we await his return. We fast in order to create space to hear God more clearly. We fast to make room for the unusual ways that God often works in the world. We fast not out of shame, guilt, or a sense of earning God’s love but out of an understanding of our need to commune with this God who loves us so much. But we must not forsake feasting in the midst of the fast. We feast because of the hope Christ’s resurrection brings. We feast because of the hope of Christ’s return. We must remember even now, in this season that is often dark and heavy, that God is present with us. That the bridegroom came and is coming again. That we can celebrate the goodness and graciousness of God, and remind ourselves and those around us of the deep ways we are loved by God.